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Congress of the United States
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WASHINGTON, DC 20515-6115

Majority (202) 225-2927
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April 29, 2011

The Honorable Gene L. Dodaro
Comptroller General
Government Accountability Office
441 G Street, N.W.
Washington, D.C. 20548

Dear Mr. Dodaro:

Nuclear power is a key component of America's long-term energy strategy, but recent events in Japan have focused public attention on the safety and security issues related to the long-term storage of large quantities of spent fuel at nuclear power plants.

In 2003, the Government Accountability Office (GAO) completed an evaluation of spent nuclear fuel security for then Energy and Air Quality Subcommittee Chairman Joe Barton.¹ Given the time since that report, an update is warranted on spent fuel safety and security.

Moreover, recent actions by the Administration and Nuclear Regulatory Commission (NRC) have raised further questions regarding the plans to remove spent fuel from existing sites. The Nuclear Waste Policy Act of 1982, as amended, requires the Department of Energy (DOE) to take title to and dispose of the spent fuel accumulating at nuclear power plants. In 2002, following extensive evaluation of the site by DOE and its national laboratories, both the President and Congress approved the development of a deep underground repository for spent fuel at Yucca Mountain, adjacent to the Nevada Test Site. This law provides a location (Yucca Mountain) and sets in motion the removal over time of the spent fuel that is accumulating at nuclear power plants around the nation. Currently, nearly 65,000 tons of commercial spent nuclear fuel is stored at 75 sites in 33 states, and this amount increases by about 2,000 tons per year. Should the current Administration succeed in its attempt to abandon development of the Yucca Mountain repository, billions of dollars will be wasted and spent fuel will continue to accumulate at nuclear power plants around the country, with no clear path for final disposition.

¹ "Spent Nuclear Fuel: Options Exist to Further Enhance Security," GAO-03-426, July 2003.

In light of safety concerns raised by the events in Japan and the uncertainty raised by the current Administration's plans for the permanent disposal of spent fuel, we request an update to your 2003 report. In particular, we seek more information about the intertwined safety and security issues surrounding spent fuel pools and ask that GAO, building on its earlier work, examine:


1. The current and year-by-year projected volume of accumulated spent fuel rods in spent fuel pools beyond the time frame when they could have been moved to away-from-reactor storage or repository sites, if such sites were available;
2. The findings of any recently completed assessments of spent fuel pool vulnerabilities and potential risk mitigation actions (including any NRC or DOE assessments) and the plans for ongoing and future studies and evaluations;
3. Safety and security systems and plans for spent fuel pools and dry cask storage currently in place at U.S. nuclear power plants, as well as any new safety measures under consideration by industry, DOE, and NRC;
4. The potential for, and challenges associated with, moving a larger percentage of U.S. spent fuel into interim dry cask storage, including the needed regulatory framework, costs, and funding sources; and,
5. Significant lessons learned from the practices and experiences of other major nuclear operators, such as Japan, regarding the safe and secure storage of spent fuel.


Thank you for your prompt attention to this request. Please work with Mr. Peter Spencer and Mr. David McCarthy of the Majority Committee staff at (202) 225-2927 on the specifics of your study.

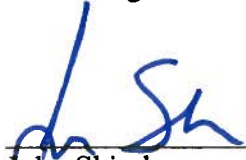
Sincerely,


Fred Upton
Chairman


Joe Barton
Chairman Emeritus


Cliff Stearns
Chairman
Subcommittee on Oversight and
Investigations


Ed Whitfield
Chairman
Subcommittee on Energy and Power


John Shimkus
Chairman
Subcommittee on Environment and
the Economy

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cc: The Honorable Henry A. Waxman, Ranking Member

The Honorable Diana DeGette, Ranking Member
Subcommittee on Oversight and Investigations

The Honorable Bobby Rush, Ranking Member
Subcommittee on Energy and Power

The Honorable Gene Green, Ranking Member
Subcommittee on Environment and the Economy